

# Kashmiri Exceptionalism

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## KASHMIRI IDENTITIES

Academic work on the Kashmir Valley and the identities of those who live there has stressed the conflict between Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri identities (Varshney 1991), or between Indian and Kashmiri political identities (Bose 1997). Another approach has been to examine the impact of Islam on identity in Kashmir (Ahmed 1990). There is some work on the nebulous concept of Kashmiriyat, or 'Kashmiriness' (Puri 1995; Ellis & Khan 2003; Zutshi 2004). The debate over Kashmiri identity really gathered pace during the 1990s, thanks mainly to the academic and political interest sparked by the violence in the Kashmir Valley that began in 1988 (Ishaq Khan 1996; Behera 2000; Wani 2001). But the actual arguments are often not new. Kashmiri identity has long been written about by visitors to Kashmir, and by Kashmiris themselves (Wani 1999). The constant theme running through these writings is Kashmiri difference. Since the 1990s the debate has widened to ask whether Kashmiri identity is changing, and there has also been a vivid but constrained debate about whether Kashmiri identity is primarily Muslim or largely syncretic (Ahmed 1990;

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Maheswari 1993; Hewitt 1995; Amin 1995). This debate has been amplified by the political debate between Kashmiri Islamists and Kashmiri secularists (Mufti 2001; Abdullah 1999). It largely excludes long-term challenges to local identities across Jammu and Kashmir wrought by globalization.

This chapter argues that a powerful form of exceptionalism exists in the Kashmir Valley. This Valley Kashmiri identity has been drawn on in turn by groups outside the Valley who aspire to be Kashmiri. The fact that these ‘new Kashmiris’ have chosen to identify as Kashmiris illustrates the growing appeal of being Kashmiri. But the new Kashmiris, whether in Pakistani-administered Kashmir<sup>1</sup> or the diaspora, often have their own reasons for asserting their different identities, and using the rhetoric of being Kashmiri is often an instrumental means to promote Kashmiri independence or access state services (Evans 2005).

#### KASHMIRI EXCEPTIONALISM

Valley Kashmiris are different. But aren't we all? What is unusual about Valley Kashmiri identity is a repeated and widely held belief that Kashmiris are *uniquely different*, or exceptional. It reflects, perhaps, the superiority complex Valley Kashmiris have *vis-à-vis* their immediate neighbours in Jammu, Mirpur, and Kargil, but it also reflects a deeper cultural tradition that has been strongly influenced by colonial writings about Kashmir and Kashmiris.

This chapter argues that there is something we can broadly call Kashmiri exceptionalism, and that as a rhetoric it can help us understand how and why Valley Kashmiris think they are different, and specially so. Exceptionalism means the condition of being exceptional or unique—and in terms of a nation, the theory or belief that a national identity does not conform to a pattern or norm. In most cases, such a belief is a conceit, for

<sup>1</sup>Known in Pakistan as Azad Kashmir, and in India as Pakistani-occupied Kashmir. The nomenclature, as with so much to do with Kashmir, remains controversial. I refer to it throughout this chapter as Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

while the indicators of difference may vary from nation to nation, the condition of difference is hardly unique. Exceptionalism was first used in the context of American democracy, and Alexis de Tocqueville is generally credited with inventing it in the mid-nineteenth century to describe America's profound differences from other nations (Fukuyama 2001). Moreover, America was to be an example to the world—hence the idea that New England was a 'City on a Hill' which could encourage the rest of the old world to aspire to emulate the American model.

Few states, ethnic groups or sub-national identities can truly claim to be exceptional. As Acharya puts it: 'Claims of exceptionalism, whether individual or collective, national or regional, often do not stand up to rigorous scholarly scrutiny' (Acharya 2001: 9). Exceptionalism is only fitfully used in a South Asian context. It has been used in discussing the conflict between Hindu nationalist or indigenous theorizing and politics versus the presumed universalist, modern secularism of 1940s and 1950s India (Greenway 2001). Amitabh Mattoo has used it in a reverse fashion, applying it to India's non-alignment foreign policy, in part a product of Fabian universalism blended with Gandhian principles of non-violence (Mattoo 2000). Karthika Sasikumar has used it in similar fashion, briefly deploying the term in describing post colonial India's pacifism versus the emergence of nuclear realism in the 1990s (Sasikumar 2004). Similarly Achin Vanaik has used it to describe the dilemmas of the Indian left in dealing with universalism *versus* post colonial particularism (Vanaik 1993), while Sarah Joseph cites it in the context of political theory and debates over Indian indigenous thinking (Joseph 1999).

Valley Kashmiris think they're uniquely special: not so, but this *perception* matters. The sense of unique difference pervades Kashmiri culture, written and oral history, religious practice, and political expression. The Kashmir conflict is sustained by the idea that Kashmir is special—primarily the place, but also the people—an idea keenly held by Kashmiris themselves, as well as mainstream Indian and Pakistani opinion. However, Kashmiri exceptionalism is different to American exceptionalism. Kashmiri exceptionalism has largely been written from outside (by colonialism and then Indian and Pakistani

nationalism, and later deployed by Kashmiri nationalists) rather than consciously co-authored (as with American exceptionalism) by settler-theologians and jurists.

It is more than Kashmiriyat (Kashmiriness), a nebulous term used only since the late 1970s. Kashmiriyat (Schofield 1997: 1) appears to have a timeless quality, but is a recent invention. It draws on an ideology deployed by the National Conference in 1948-53 to establish a J&K-wide, syncretic aspirational identity that all communities across J&K could join. But it has only been used more recently, again largely in an attempt to promote harmonious unity across the diverse state of J&K. Opinions differ on this, but Mohd. Ishaq Khan, Kashmir's leading historian, argues that it has only been used since the 1975 Sheikh-Indira Accord (Ishaq Khan 1983, and e-mail to the author, 26 March 2005). The Australian academic Chris Snedden argues that 'while the label "Kashmiriyat" has only really appeared in English-language writings in the last ten years or so, the concept of Kashmiriness predates the label by, at the very least, many centuries' (Snedden 2001). And Kashmiriyat is nebulous. 'Kashmiriyat!' scoffed one Kashmiri journalist in early 2005; 'It's a mirror. You can see in it what you want.'

Valley Kashmiris mainly argue that it is Valley-specific, although in a joint article Zafar Khan, an academic (and British pro-independence activist from Pakistani-administered Kashmir), argues that it is above all about the 'unity of Kashmir' (Ellis and Khan 2003: 534). And a JKLF interviewee in Srinagar in April 2001 described it as being about the cultural pluralism of Kashmir (Dar 2001). Pakistani authors generally do not refer to Kashmiriyat, partly because it is used by Indian authors seeking to underline the Valley's differences from Pakistan. It is ironic that a rhetoric of a J&K-wide Kashmiri identity was first used by the National Conference in the early 1950s. Sheikh Abdullah used it to distinguish a regional state identity from an all-Indian national identity. Today a Kashmiri identity is more likely to be deployed by those who wish to emphasize the Kashmir Valley's similarities with India, and to differentiate the Valley from Pakistan. Mehbooba Mufti, a PDP leader, argues that this reflects the National Conference's ambiguous politics during

the 1980s (Mufti 2001). No matter when it is used, it illustrates how politicized Kashmiri identity is as a concept.

Chitralkha Zutshi has penned a trenchant critique in which she points out that ‘to suggest that a Kashmiri identity, Kashmiriyat, defined as a harmonious blending of religious cultures, has somehow remained an unchanged and integral part of Kashmiri history over the centuries is a historical fallacy’ (Zutshi 2004: 55). Kashmir may have followed particular trajectories, she adds, but it is ahistorical to assume that Kashmiri identity has remained aloof from societal change. And despite recent claims that Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus have always used the same shrines and so on, the evidence Zutshi provides shows there were many divisions between them—and within each community (take Ahl-i-Hadith critiques of shrine worship among Muslim Kashmiris). And Kashmiriyat was not in great evidence when Zutshi and others examined in detail the political campaign for greater Muslim rights against a Hindu-run princely state in the 1930s.

Nonetheless, Kashmiri exceptionalism draws on several hundred years of colonial writing, which I deal with shortly, and a literary and oral tradition within Kashmir. Kashmiri exceptionalism has an echo in the Indian and Pakistani nationalist projects. For India, Kashmir is the Muslim-majority state that cannot go. For Pakistan, Kashmir is the Muslim cause that cannot be forgone. As such it is crucial in explaining both countries maximalist policy positions in their bilateral dispute over Kashmir. The narrow arrogation of Kashmir by Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri nationalists has reduced the various conflicts in Kashmir to simple stories, which encourage simplistic ‘solutions’. There are plenty of books on Kashmir that encourage, define, or promote particular solutions.

#### VALLEY KASHMIRIS AND THE ROOTS OF KASHMIRI EXCEPTIONALISM

Kashmiri exceptionalism is about how and why Valley Kashmiris understand themselves to be totally different from others. In short, it is how Kashmiris consider Kashmir—and themselves—to be unique. One of the most compelling characteristics of

Valley Kashmiris is a profound sense of difference from the rest of the world. Unwrapped from the prosaic world of politics, this sense runs fierce. In contemporary Kashmir, it has two main pillars; geography and language.<sup>2</sup>

#### GEOGRAPHY

The attachment which a Kashmiri feels to his own land is confined to the Vale of Kashmir. To be sent to Kargil or Leh, is exile, and the Kashmiri longs to be back in Srinagar or its neighbourhood, where there is life, warmth and abundance. The State of Kashmir is a political creation, but for the Kashmiri, as for history, his country is only the Vale of Kashmir, the territory of the Jhelum and its tributaries from its source to Baramulla. (Ferguson 1961: 199)

For centuries the Kashmir Valley has been a specific geographical zone, encircled as it is by high mountains. A long history of being coveted by Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras helped to accentuate a sense of importance. Remote, exotic, and beautiful, the Kashmir Valley was swiftly arrogated as a European romantic fantasy in the nineteenth century. This was most evident in 1817 when the poet Thomas Moore wrote *Lalla Rookh*, his epic poem on Kashmir. Moore never visited Kashmir. However, his poem had sold 83,500 copies in 55 editions by 1880 alone, and 'it indelibly glamorized Kashmir's reputation in the eyes of the [British] public' (Keenan 1990: 92-5). The widely held platitude that Kashmir is the 'Switzerland of Asia' has similar roots. A leading Kashmiri intellectual describes Kashmir as long confined to 'these four walls of mountains, allowing a strange, unique and unparalleled identity to develop'. But the Valley was never quite as isolated as this myth-making suggests: despite often being cut off in winter and some time summer (most recently through flooding in August 2007) the Valley has always interacted with surrounding regions, and has

<sup>2</sup>Underlined by an impressionistic poll I conducted at [www.jammukashmir.net](http://www.jammukashmir.net) in April 2001: the 798 respondents chose language (19 per cent) and geography (29 per cent) as the primary factors in determining Kashmiri identity (culture and religion came third and fourth). 58 per cent of the respondents said that Srinagar was Kashmir's centre of gravity.

been on major trade routes from the Indian plains to Kashmir and Tibet. By the nineteenth century a widespread Kashmiri diaspora was settled as far away as Lhasa, Beijing, Isfahan, and Lahore—partly drawn by commercial opportunity, partly pushed by famines, disasters, and taxation at home.

Today Kashmir is a relatively nebulous term. Sometimes referring solely to the Valley, it can also refer to the wider Kashmir division, or even the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—a mishmash of conquered peoples and territories reflecting the spread of the Dogra empire during the nineteenth century. Both Jammu and Ladakh have distinct cultural identities and political histories of their own (Puri 1983; Rizvi 1996; van Beek 1996). Despite more than a hundred years as part of Jammu and Kashmir, both Jammu and Ladakh have sought to assert their own identities, particularly since 1947 and the dominant political role played by Valley Kashmiris since. And differences of opinion about Kashmiri identity exist among Valley Kashmiris and their close neighbours from Chakothi and the Neelum/Kishenganga Valley. During a visit to Muzaffarabad in 1997, a fierce debate broke out over dinner with a mixed group of Kashmiris (some from the Valley, and some from Pakistani-administered Kashmir). The question asked was ‘Who is a Kashmiri?’ There was no consensus as those present argued whether it was language, geography, traditions, or dress.

#### Koshur: THE KASHMIRI LANGUAGE

The Kashmiri language is perhaps the principal defining feature of Valley Kashmiri identity. Speaking Koshur confers immediate membership of a common community, with a range of shared proverbs, stories, poets, and jokes. While Koshur plays a limited role in contemporary Kashmir, remaining the language of the ‘kitchen and the bedroom’ (Andrabi 2001), it forms the basis of most oral culture in the Valley and binds together Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims (whether Shia or Sunni, Sufi, or Islamist). Koshur defines in many ways the extent of a claim to Kashmiri exceptionalism; as Koshur-speaking areas are remarkably contiguous with the Valley itself. The Kashmiri language is spoken mainly in the Kashmir Valley, although it

also has pockets in the northern districts of Jammu (especially Kishtwar), along with a few villages in Pakistani-administered Kashmir (Kashmir Study Group, 2000). These are mainly in the Neelum, or Kishenganga, Valley in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and run close to the line of control with Indian-administered Kashmir (visits to the Neelum Valley in 2003, 2004).

Retaining a unique structure, koshur stands out in sharp contrast to all other South Asian languages. Within the Kashmir Valley only Gujars and the Pahari-speaking belt at the Valley's edge remain apart from this strong linguistic identity (Hussain 1997; Rao 1999). The Kashmiri language, while moribund in some respects, and largely overtaken by Urdu as a local link language, adds to the unique sense of being Kashmiri that pervades the Valley. Yet Koshur also illustrates the differences within the Valley itself: between the three dialects (Kamrazi in the north-west of the Valley, Marazi in the south of the Valley and Yamrazi of Srinagar [Dhar 1985], and between Valley Koshur speakers and koshur speakers in Kishtwar, who speak a dialect which harkens back to the fourteenth century (Evans 2005).

Around four million people speak Koshur today—with all but around 300,000 inside Jammu and Kashmir (Koul 2004: 5). Most are Valley-based, but according to the 1981 census, around 300,000 Koshur speakers lived in Jammu region—mainly in Kishtwar. In 1991, only 56,693 Koshur speakers lived in India outside Jammu and Kashmir (Census of India 1991), but to this we need to add the Koshur-speaking diaspora worldwide along with Kashmiri Pandits who have been displaced to Delhi and other Indian cities. The international diaspora includes around 1,000 families in the United States, 500 families in Britain, and around 30,000 Koshur speakers in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Koshur is relatively neglected. It enjoys low public status (Pandharipande 2002)—not least as the official language of Jammu & Kashmir state since 1907 has been Urdu (Koul 2004), displacing Persian, the former courtly and intellectual language. Koshur has only briefly been a formal part of the school curriculum, as part of the primary school curriculum in Kashmir from 1948 to 1955. Some, like the Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, believe



it is 'dying' because it is not being taught (Mirwaiz 2001). In the early 1970s a postgraduate centre for Koshur was set up at the University of Kashmir, although few students study there. Although used by Radio Kashmir, and now Kashir TV, no mainstream newspapers are published in Koshur (though a fortnightly has recently been launched) and its status remains that of an earthy vernacular (Koul 2001). Most Koshur speakers are not functionally literate in Koshur (but read and write in Urdu, English, Hindi, etc.). Moreover, no urban poet has written in Koshur, underlining its rural nature (Andrabi 2001). In Srinagar, elite families sometimes prefer not to use Koshur, viewing it as a village tongue.

The late Professor M.A. Andrabi emphasized Koshur's dilemma. Koshur, he explained, is a wonderful language for expressing emotion but it lacks a vocabulary for intellectual discussion. No non-fiction comes out in Koshur, and *Wattan*, a Koshur newspaper, folded after a few months when launched during the 1970s (Andrabi 2001). However, other Kashmiris challenge this—pointing to the use of Koshur in commercial transactions, preaching at mosques and even party political activity. Unsurprisingly, though, Koshur scores highly in affective surveys of Koshur speakers—but poorly when it comes to the status or literary value of Koshur (here Urdu or English are preferred). While 61 per cent of Koshur speakers use it in the home; only 31 per cent use it at work (Mohan 1989). And Kashmiri friends tell me they dream in Koshur.

It can be argued that Koshur itself is syncretic, although care has to be taken with this. Although it draws on a number of different South Asian languages, there are differences between Hindu and Muslim use of Koshur—in script (Devanagari for Hindu Pandits, Perso-Arabic for Muslims) and pronunciation, morphology, and vocabulary. It is spoken by both Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Hindus, and as a second language by many Valley Sikhs.

Koshur, still little studied in its social—as distinct from linguistic—context, remains a pivotal element in Kashmiri identity. Despite its relatively low status and marginalized role in contemporary Kashmir, it continues to transmit the oral culture that internalizes Kashmiri exceptionalism. And Koshur is the

principal reason why the new Kashmiris in Mirpur, Kotli and the UK will always be differently Kashmiri, excluded as they are from the linguistic belonging to the Valley. Set against this is the reality of a wider Kashmiri identity than a simple linguistic one. Pahari speakers from Uri and Gurais still firmly consider themselves to be Kashmiris, even if they speak little or no Koshur (although most speak or understand at least some Koshur). And Koshur is increasingly used on the Internet, albeit informally romanized. One diaspora Valley Kashmiri suggests a Roman script for Koshur, arguing it would help boost its literary output and status (Mehjoor 2005). Interestingly, the increasing informal use of Koshur for e-mail and Internet chat may herald a *de facto* revival of sorts among the urban middle classes in Srinagar—the principal group who previously looked down upon Koshur.

#### COLONIAL STEREOTYPES

The twin pillars of geography and language are underpinned (and perhaps overwhelmed when it comes to defining Kashmiri identity) by colonial writings on Kashmir. With very few exceptions (Bernier 1826; and Jacquemont 1834) most of the colonial literature romanticizes the Kashmir Valley, but excoriates its people. François Bernier visited Kashmir in 1664 and is a notable exception. He wrote that Kashmiris were celebrated for their wit, poetry, intelligence, and scientific prowess (Keenan 1990: 82).

Over time a colonial stereotype develops: Kashmiris are weak, timid, prone to deceit, and lazy. A flood of later visitors reiterated the myth of a set Kashmiri character, partly as a result of the European cultural baggage they carried, partly out of lazy repetition (71-128). This comes over most acridly in the work of C.E. Tyndall-Biscoe in the 1930s. It has also become common currency in India and Pakistan. Even Kashmiris themselves have absorbed these stereotypes, and use them to describe themselves. However, it flatly contradicts the experience that I have had on repeated visits to the Valley. Hospitality, warmth, a sense of humour and honour, run thick in rural Kashmir.

What type of stereotypes have colonial writers developed about Kashmiris?

- *Kashmiris are weak.* Lord Birdwood aptly summed up this myth by describing it as the belief that Kashmiris remained ‘hypnotised rabbits’ in the face of successive dominations (Birdwood 1955: 246). John Keay, one of the most historiographically-aware historians working on India, writes of ‘placid’ Kashmiris (Keay 2001).
- *Kashmiris are effeminate.* Unlike Rajputs or Sudhans, Kashmiris were not considered a martial people, and both the Dogras and their predecessors tended to use soldiers from other areas (particularly from the hilly regions around Kashmir). Tyndall-Biscoe suggested that Kashmiris had lost their manhood as a result of repeated invasions (Tyndall-Biscoe 1922: 79). His wider comments about Kashmiri character were very offensive, even by the standards of the times (77-94).
- *Kashmiris are lazy.* Canon Tyndall-Biscoe set up the Church Mission School in Srinagar with the avowed purpose of providing a muscular education to the ‘physically lazy’ youth of Kashmir (James 1997: 502). And yet the largest source of employment in the Valley remains agriculture, and demands hard labour.
- *Kashmiris are untrustworthy.* Tavleen Singh reports: ‘The first political remark I ever remember hearing about Kashmir is: All Kashmiris are traitors. Everyone believed it, everyone said it, all the time.’ (Singh 1996: 1) Ironically, both Indian and Pakistani military officers have described Kashmiris in similar terms during the 1990s. The Dard Shins of Gilgit even have a saying: ‘if you see a snake and a Kashmiri, kill the Kashmiri’. (Shams Rahman, e-mail to Kashnet, 24 March 2005.) Of course, Kashmiris have invaded areas outside the Valley before—during the reign of Lalitaditya in the eighth century, for example. Intriguingly, one of the founders of the post-1988 militancy, the JKLF leader Amanullah Khan, said that one of the points of militancy was that ‘No damn bloody person can say Kashmiris are cowards’ (Amanullah Khan 1997).
- *Kashmiris are superstitious, selfish and pessimistic.* Thus reads the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: ‘Superstition has made the Kashmiri timid; tyranny has made him a liar; while

physical disasters have made him selfish and pessimistic.’ (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911). This follows on from Wakefield (Wakefield 1879: 101) and others.

Above all, colonial stereotypes fed a myth that *Kashmiris have no political agency*. Popular political history in Kashmir is therefore about foreign rule, or the lack of decent rule. History happens to Kashmiris; they don’t feel that they make history. As Chowdhary has written, a powerful public perception of an oppressive history is a major contributor to a collective political consciousness in Kashmir (Chowdhary 2000). The collective inheritance of colonial stereotypes, and the continued salience of language and geography in sustaining a sense of difference, encourages a form of inertia in the Valley. Kashmir’s political economy is relevant here: a culture of generous subsidies since 1947 has not encouraged innovative development. So too is the intense Indo-Pak competition over Kashmir, leading many Kashmiris to feel ‘subsumed by India and used by Pakistan’ (Simons 1999). Other sources of a shared history of oppression include Kashmiri proverbs (Wani 1997: 57-64), *Bhand Paithar* folk plays—bottom-up, irreverent theatre with rural roots that depicts Valley Kashmiris as submissive but humorous (Raghubir Singh 1983: 17-18), and even Kashmiri jokes. One goes as follows:

A Kashmiri man encounters a fellow Kashmiri at the roadside.  
 ‘Why do you not wash?’ he asks.  
 ‘Because I am poor.’ the second man replies. (as told by Kashmiri friends in Sopore, 2003)

This Kashmiri joke illustrates the culture of dependency in Kashmir. All problems are presumed to be structural, external, imposed. What can Kashmiris do in the face of this? Yet the joke also shows Kashmiri sophistication: the humour comes from the sheer absurdity of the response ‘Because I am poor’. Contemporary politicians in the Valley are fond of blaming outsiders for their woes, be it Delhi, Islamabad, political Islam, the Americans, or the British. All the political parties do this, some more plaintively than others. (Although I have more than sneaking sympathy for electricity engineers who explain that

you can only supply so much power in the Valley when consumers are unwilling to pay for it and expect it by right.)

Thus the rhetoric runs that external forces shape Kashmiri history; forces in which Kashmiris themselves have no part to play but that of tragic subject. This profound culture of victimhood contributes to a sense of unique difference. As one diaspora Kashmiri writes, 'There are probably a few races in the world upon whom hands of fate have been laid so heavily.'<sup>3</sup> And yet Kashmiris make all sorts of things happen. Kashmiris helped stimulate the JKLF militant campaign (1988-94) in Kashmir. Kashmiris helped blunt an aggressive but marginal violent campaign to forcibly Islamize the Valley (1989-94), thoroughly rejecting it. And Kashmiris are increasingly rejecting violence as a political tactic. And historically, Kashmiris have been happy to use 'being Kashmiri' as a means to dampen political challenges from other regions. In the late 1940s Sheikh Abdullah used it to great effect in prioritizing Koshur-speaking Valley interests over those of Jammu and Ladakh.

Other factors also come into play. I have not dealt here with religious practices or syncretism (for example, Rishi and Sufi influences in the Valley). In part this is because Kashmiris themselves allude less often to these (although non-Kashmiris tend to focus in on religious syncretism). Religious syncretism is not unique to the Valley (as can be seen by the number of *ziarats* in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and the Sufi and Bareilvi traditions that persist there). But the issue of syncretic practice is complex: even when it exists, there can be subtle differences between Hindu and Muslim activities (Madan 1989).

#### THE 'NEW KASHMIRIS'

Nothing underlines the concept of Kashmiri exceptionalism than the fact that it has now been adopted by non-Valley, non-Koshur-speaking peoples. Today various tribal/caste groups in Pakistani-administered Kashmir identify themselves as Kashmiris whereas they did not a few decades ago. The same is true for the one million plus diaspora from Pakistani-

<sup>3</sup>See the introductory page at <http://www.kanger.crosswinds.net/> (accessed 1 February 2004).

administered Kashmir (split between the Gulf, Pakistan, and the UK). The two groups of ‘new Kashmiris’, one mainly in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, the other in the non-Koshur-speaking diaspora, challenge the uniqueness of a Valley Kashmiri identity. After all, what they mean by being Kashmiri is often different to the meaning understood by Valley Kashmiris. Yet they also confirm Kashmiri exceptionalism, as the *idea* of being Kashmiri is being both copied and transformed by communities predominantly consisting of Mirpuri Jats. Given the colonial stereotypes, it might seem odd that Mirpuris and others seek to become Kashmiri. Yet the social status of Valley Kashmiris has always been higher than that of Pahari-speaking Mirpuris. And the social standing of Valley Kashmiris, and of being Kashmiri, has risen as a result of the post-1988 violence in Kashmir. Actually being Kashmiri has become fashionable.

It has also proved politically useful. A slow-burn infection from the 1960s onwards, the spread of Kashmiri exceptionalism provided part of an organizing ideology to a small band of diaspora Kashmiri nationalists, eventually helping to give birth to the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Later on in the 1990s, it proved useful for a small group of nationalist sympathizers who campaign for a separate Kashmiri ethnic identity in Britain. And in Pakistani-administered Kashmir itself—historically largely a successor zone to the politics of Jammu division, rather than that of Kashmir division—Kashmiri exceptionalism offers elements of ideology to help intellectually bind it more closely to the Kashmir Valley.

#### THE ‘NEW KASHMIRIS’ IN PAKISTANI-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR

Jammu and Kashmir, we are told, was cleaved in two in 1947. The Kashmir issue is in many ways the political shadow of Hari Singh’s princely state. But the state itself was shortlived (1846-1947) and many of the territories and peoples within it were never consulted as they were sold off (as with the Valley, by the British in 1846), invaded (as with the Ladakhis, repeatedly), nearly incorporated (the Tibetans, 1841 [Huttenback 1969]), or even swapped for unruly bits of Hazara (1847-9). Another

accident of history—the (hotly contested) events of October 1947—led to the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir being *de facto* divided between India and Pakistan. This dividing line, originally the ceasefire line and since 1971 the Line of Control (LOC) is sometimes spoken of as if it is a natural division, given the cultural differences between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar.

In fact, the natural divisions in J&K run more north-east/south-west—the natural difference is between the Kashmir Valley (more broadly, Kashmir division) and Jammu division (which includes Kotli, Mirpur, and Poonch). On this basis the bulk of Pakistani-administered Kashmir falls into the Jammu division, and its political history after 1947 was dominated by Muslim Conference politicians from Jammu alongside influential Sudhan tribal leaders from near Poonch. It is worth commenting on the centres of gravity on each side of the LOC. On the Indian side, the north is powerful—Srinagar, representing the Kashmir Valley, dominates Jammu despite the latter's politicians regularly grumbling about this. On the Pakistani side, the south-east (Sudhan heartland) and south (Mirpur) dominate, while the north (both Muzaffarabad and the Neelum) is less influential. The reasons for this are partly historical. In 1948, both Sheikh Abdullah's government in Indian-administered Kashmir and Sardar Muhammad Ibrahim's government in Pakistani-administered Kashmir claimed to be the successor administrations in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. But the politicians in Muzaffarabad almost wholly came from south of the Pir Panjal: their principal constituency was the old Jammu division—the southern part of Jammu and Kashmir—rather than the Kashmir division. Indeed, during the 1940s Jammu Muslims constituted the bedrock of Muslim Conference support (Wani 1999).

There is not the space to go into this here, but what is interesting is that most of those who lived in Pakistani-administered Kashmir in 1947 did not call themselves Kashmiri. Indeed, most would feel most keenly tied to clan/*biraderi* identities (e.g. being Sudhan, Rajput, or a Sayyid). If pressed, they said they were Pakistanis—and those living closer to the Punjabi plain felt a strong affiliation with the Punjab. Almost all spoke

(and speak) Pahari, which, depending on your view, is either a (hill) dialect of Punjabi (Institute of Linguists 2004) or a separate language in its own right (so says the Kashmir National Identity Campaign 2001). However, the Gujars—of which there are, perhaps, some 600,000, speak Gojri (although they usually understand Pahari as well). Only a handful of villages are Koshur-speaking. However, some, like Patricia Ellis and Zafar Khan, argue that Pakistani-administered Kashmir represents the spirit of Kashmiriyat (Ellis and Khan 2003: 524). This is based on a far broader reading of Kashmiriyat, and one that is altogether different from that of Valley Kashmiris.

Pakistani-administered Kashmir attracts little academic attention (Hussain 2005). Notwithstanding its effective administration and political profile linked to the Kashmir dispute, Pakistani-administered Kashmir relies—like Jammu and Kashmir—on 50 per cent central government subsidies in 2001 (Mehmoud 2001). This economic dependence on Pakistan has been augmented by a strong intellectual inferiority complex. The residents of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, almost entirely Pahari speakers, are looked down upon by both Valley Kashmiris and Pakistani Punjabis. Even after 1990, since when the political value of the Pakistani-administered Kashmir administration has risen, the Government of Pakistan chose to support a separatist alliance based in the Kashmir Valley to represent Kashmiris, rather than relying upon the largely elected Pakistani-administered Kashmir assembly, which has seats for Indian-administered Kashmir. Ellis and Khan argue persuasively that these seats, usually held by refugees, help to fortify an all-Kashmir identity in Pakistani-administered Kashmir (Ellis and Khan 2003: 536).

The tribal nature of politics in Pakistani-administered Kashmir—quite unlike the mainly factional politics of the Kashmir Valley—has also helped to keep Pakistani-administered Kashmir marginal. Clans (*biraderis*) continue to play the leading role in social organization in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and many senior politicians accept that *biraderi* continues to exercise greater influence on electoral politics in Pakistani-administered Kashmir than political parties (though some, particularly the more progressive PPP, argue this is changing



rapidly). So residents of Pakistani-administered Kashmir too suffer stereotyping:

- *Backward hill peoples.* Pahari speakers in Pakistani-administered Kashmir have long been looked down upon by urban Punjabis (and urban Valley Kashmiris) as uneducated, unsophisticated country bumpkins. A number of Punjabi and Kashmiri jokes pertain to Mirpuris in particular. After 1947, all of the urban Pahari-speaking Hindus and Sikhs left Pakistani-administered Kashmir, with many settling in Jammu. Several thousand were killed; as were thousands of Jammu's Muslims travelling in the opposite direction. Yet urban Mirpuris are increasingly educated, and in Pakistani-administered Kashmir are increasingly well-off.
- *Peasants, porters, and migrant labourers:* Pakistani-administered Kashmir has long provided migrant labourers to the Punjab, and from selected groups (Rajputs and Sudhans) soldiers for Sikh, Dogra, and British service. This contributed to an equally partial view of local identities as these two groups were cast as 'martial races' by the British. Such stereotyping remains remarkably persistent, as contemporary Pakistani and Indian military recruitment attests (Barua 1995). Many residents were compelled to provide labour for the Sikhs, the Dogras, and then the British. These 'portering' groups, essentially non-martial Pahari speakers and Gujars, enjoy lower status not least because seasonal migrant labouring continues.

Much of Pakistani-administered Kashmir had strong links to the Punjab. The Pahari spoken in Mirpur is very close to that spoken in the Punjab's Lower Jehlum: the natural links were into the Punjab, rather than over high mountain passes into the Kashmir Valley. In Mirpur and Muzaffarabad, the relationship with the Pakistani state and Punjabi culture has dominated identity politics from 1947, along with the (suspended) relationship with Srinagar.

In 1967 the Mangla Dam was completed. As a result, thousands of hectares of mainly fertile land were flooded and lines of communication were severely disrupted. The dam itself covers

97.7 sq miles. Mangla, as the principal driver for major Mirpuri migration to the United Kingdom, has had an impact on Mirpuri identity, and ironically, is now used as a reference point by Kashmiri nationalists (from Mirpur) arguing that Pakistan, as much as India, has placed its own interests over and above those of Kashmiris. The building of the dam had adverse medium-term impact on the local economy around Mirpur. The introduction of direct elections from 1975 helped reduce tensions. However, in the summer of 1976, nine years after it was completed, a wedding party from Dadial drowned while crossing the huge reservoir. Locals angry at the impact of the dam were said to have raised the Indian flag, not as a pro-Indian gesture, but as a sign of their discontent with Islamabad's lack of consultation. The government of Pakistan had to airlift in soldiers to restore authority (Ballard 1991: 515).

Mirpuris in particular felt hard done by. Not only were they adversely affected by the Mangla Dam, and the butt of Punjabi and Kashmiri humour, but they were also at the bottom of a complex social hierarchy in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The complex interplay between tribes and clans (*biraderi*), augmented after the 1970s with elections and a competitive political party system, led to social power heavily influenced by *biraderi* affiliations. The most numerous group in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, the Gujars, were politically weak (like their counterparts in the Kashmir Valley). Instead, a small but 'martial' tribe, the Sudhans, dominated politics in alliance with the Rajputs. Interestingly, the JKLF historically drew many activists from among the Sudhans, and today the leader of Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistani-administered Kashmir is also a Sudhan. Sudhan discontent with Pakistani policies in Pakistani-administered Kashmir led to disturbances in 1955 and 1978. The Gujars (spread across the whole area) and Mirpuri Jats (concentrated around Mirpur itself) remained weak, and tended to follow suit. But the post-war migration of Mirpuri Jats to Britain, which led to today's 450,000-strong community, brought wealth to Mirpur. Remittances and links to Britain generated social capital—and by the early 1990s, *in tandem* with the growing importance of diaspora political activity on Kashmir, this was traded in for substantive political power. In 1996 a Mirpuri Jat,

Sultan Mehmoud, was elected Prime Minister of Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The changing social status of Mirpuris also encouraged redefinition as Kashmiris. Kashmiriness in Mirpur can be seen as an assertion of local agency in contrast to perceived condescension from Punjabis, as well as a rhetorical basis for a stronger sense of self-respect. After all, few Valley Kashmiris were likely to contradict them, as contacts between the Indian and Pakistani-administered Kashmir were minimal. Ironically, if being Kashmiri in the Valley is about celebrating the colonial cliché of victimhood, becoming Kashmiri was, for Mirpuris, a vehicle to being taken more seriously by Punjabis and the British state.

#### THE 'NEW KASHMIRIS' IN BRITAIN

Today there are an estimated 450,000 Pakistani 'Kashmiris' resident in the United Kingdom (Ballard 1991; 2003). Most are migrants from the 1960s or 1970s (and their descendents) from Pakistani-administered Kashmir who came to Britain as a result of the development of the Mangla Dam. Most are Mirpuri Jats, with a few Rajputs and a handful of Sudhans and others. (Set against this is a tiny diaspora of some five hundred Valley Kashmiri families.) Some of the larger diaspora consisted of Kashmiri nationalists, and they used their new base to organize themselves. British-based Kashmiri nationalists actively campaigned for Kashmiri self-determination from the mid-1960s onwards. In September 1976 the pro-independence JKLF was founded in Birmingham. Over time their all-Kashmir agenda percolated into diaspora organizations and politics (Ali 2003). By the 1980s a small but active Kashmiri independence movement was thriving in British towns like Luton, Birmingham, Bradford, Oldham, and Bolton, drawing predominantly Mirpuri recruits. One or two Valley Kashmiris were also involved. In 1982 the JKLF split, with Amanullah Khan arguing for an armed movement and Jabbar Butt pushing for a peaceful campaign. Several activists associated with Amanullah Khan were responsible for the murder of an Indian diplomat in the UK, Ravinder Mhatre, in February 1984 (as well as earlier threats against Indian diplomats).

On arrival in Britain, Mirpuris generally found themselves relying on Punjabi Pakistanis for a job, a place to live, and for any mediatory access to government services. As the British state began to provide translators and special teachers for minority communities in the 1980s, Urdu-speaking Punjabis dominated the sector while Mirpuris largely found themselves socially excluded. But the growing numbers of British Mirpuris represented a valuable vote-bank in over a dozen parliamentary constituencies, and Mirpuris found themselves with growing (although mainly local) clout. As the Kashmir issue regained the headlines in 1990, Mirpuri community leaders sought to get involved, often displacing their Punjabi predecessors (Ali et al.: 1996). The vehicle for most of this politics was the Labour Party, and by the late 1990s Mirpuri activists were also active within local party units.

A small group of pro-independence Mirpuris lobbied the British government to recognize Kashmiri as a separate ethnic identity in its own right, and for Pahari to be given recognition as a separate language (Kashmir National Identity Campaign 2001). The former campaign has largely proven unsuccessful, at least on the national stage, although activists have launched a Pahari literary magazine (Shakil 2004). Kashmiri was not an option in the 2001 UK census, and any write-in of Kashmiri in the self-definition box was treated as a Pakistani self-identification by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This was despite a campaign supported by forty-one MPs who signed a supportive early day motion backing Kashmiri as a distinct ethnic category group. Some inroads have been made elsewhere, however, in particular with certain local Councils and NHS Agencies. In the May 2000 local elections in Britain, Mirpuris from the Justice for Kashmir party gained five seats on the Birmingham City Council (*Economist* 20 April 2000). The JFK has since changed its name to the People's Justice Party, reflecting—perhaps more accurately—its emphasis on local issues, despite its transnational roots with the JKLF. In the 2005 general election a Respect candidate working alongside the PJP gained 10,498 votes (27.5 per cent compared to the PJP's 13 per cent in 2001) in a Birmingham constituency, which may reflect anti-Iraq war sentiments but also illustrates some of the

divisions that now exist between Punjabis and Mirpuris, and among the different *biraderis*.

It is impossible to establish how many Mirpuris and others originating from Pakistani-administered Kashmir now call themselves Kashmiri, but the numbers are substantial. By no means all share the Kashmir National Identity Campaign's preference for an independent Kashmir—but rather like Valley Kashmiris, British Mirpuris who are 'new Kashmiris' are signifying their right to define themselves. Becoming Kashmiri has become a nodal point for diasporic identity formation, and the Internet is increasingly the vehicle for articulating this (Ranganathan 2003). Also, as Pnina Werbner has explained, pressures within the UK as much as issues in Pakistan have helped to construct British Pakistani identities. Hence some in the diaspora, including those from Pakistani-administered Kashmir, head in a different direction—embracing a broader identity as a Muslim rather than as a Kashmiri.

British Valley Kashmiris, meanwhile, keep their distance. Among the British diaspora Valley Kashmiri families organize themselves separately through the Kashmiri Association of Great Britain. Unlike other organizations, it was simply a social organization for Koshur speakers, and took no political positions. Even so, this association ran into difficulties during the 1990s, with Kashmiri Pandit families largely withdrawing from it. There are now efforts to fortify it once more, although differences of perception persist between British Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus as to what is going on in Kashmir. Despite these problems, it is rare to see Koshur-speaking Valley Kashmiris mixing socially with Mirpuris. Privately, Valley Kashmiris complain that the Kashmir issue in the UK has been hijacked by Mirpuris. 'They call themselves Kashmiris,' one told me in 2002, 'but their Kashmir does not suffer like ours'.

There is some evidence to support the appeal of Kashmiri exceptionalism among the diaspora. Nasreen Ali explains that one of the organizing factors in a ethnic Kashmiri diaspora presents the Kashmiri diaspora as united by political oppression (Ali 2003: 475). And diaspora 'new Kashmiris' actively identify as Kashmiris, although this sometimes leads to confusing excess, as when Mirpuri nationalists mistakenly claim on news-groups postings that the Pahari language *is* Kashmiri.

## CONCLUSION: SO JUST WHO IS A KASHMIRI?

How can a *gora* writer call the shots on who is (or is not) a Kashmiri? This one certainly is not about to try. What appears interesting is the wider groups of people who today call themselves Kashmiri. All come from (or have family links to) the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. But not all come from the Kashmir Valley, nor are they necessarily Koshur speakers. Indeed, we find four discrete groups:

- Valley Kashmiris (including non-Koshur speakers, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits, and Sikhs but potentially not including Gujars) and a few immediate neighbours (Koshur speakers in Kishtwar, Neelum/Kishenganga, and other enclaves);
- The ‘new Kashmiris’ in Pakistani-administered Kashmir (mainly Mirpuri Jats and Rajputs, while Gujars tend to remain Gujars, and Sudhans dipping in and out as it suits them);
- Diaspora ‘new Kashmiris’ (‘new Kashmiris’ often choosing to be Kashmiri for reasons that can differ from their kin in Pakistani-administered Kashmir);
- Diaspora Valley Kashmiris (mainly Koshur speakers, both Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims).

These categories have to be treated with caution: as there are plenty of divisions within each, and uniting factors between them. *But the obvious split between the two is one of language*: there is a division between Koshur Kashmiris (and a dominantly Valley identity, even in the diaspora) and the ‘new Kashmiris’ (who live in, or originate from, Pakistani-administered Kashmir).

Moreover, there are plenty of groups who, while they live within Jammu and Kashmir, do not self-identify as Kashmiris. Shia Muslims in Kargil (Grist 1999), almost all Jammu residents (fieldwork 1997, 1999, 2001), and both Muslim and Buddhist Ladakhis (van Beek 2004) are but three examples. And while many Mirpuri Jats have taken to describing themselves as Kashmiri, their Sudhan neighbours around Kotli and Rawalakot are less inclined to give up their strong local tribal identity. Being Kashmiri, then, is important to some of—but by no means

all—the peoples living in Jammu and Kashmir. But being Kashmiri, no matter what definition one chooses to use, is different to being a state-subject of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite living in Hari Singh's shadow, not all who hail from the state are happy to call themselves Kashmiris.

This chapter offers some thoughts on what 'being Kashmiri' means today. It is not meant to be a conclusive commentary, nor can it be, given it is written by an outsider. But I hope it provokes some interesting responses. In researching these questions over the past decade I have come to think that the greatest challenges to Kashmiri identities come from the rapid economic and technological changes underway across the old princely state. Already the Kashmir Valley is losing many of the marks of its mainly rural identity. Tongas, horse-drawn carts, are still in evidence in Sopore and in Kashmiri villages—but are not likely to survive much longer (*Kashmir Times*, 23 September 2001). And the rich oral culture within the Valley may be tougher to transmit when family storytelling has to compete with cable TV and the Internet. And Valley Kashmiris are culturally impoverished now that all but five thousand or so Kashmiri Pandits have left the Valley (Evans 2002). Without their Hindu brethren, whose Koshur and cultural inheritance varies, the Valley's Muslims will lose out on the full richness of Kashmiri culture. Pakistani-administered Kashmir is also experiencing social change resulting from the slow transition from a primarily *biraderi*-based political system to a competitive party system. In the longer term, there may be economic shocks in store for Mirpur if the opportunities for overseas labour and the migrant remittances they bring dry up. Already remittances from British Mirpuris are falling.

Of course, there has always been the influence of social movements. Back in 1901 state officials worried about the 'alarming' spread of Ahl-i-Hadith ideology in Jammu. Kashmiri political mobilization at the turn of the twentieth century was inspired by similar mobilization in the Punjab. And even as they joined Islamist militant groups in Kashmir, young militants in the mid-1990s often mimicked Bollywood style. Although this chapter concentrates on developing the concept of Kashmiri exceptionalism, it also leaves the question hanging as to how

Kashmiri identity is being influenced by globalization. Although strongly rooted in language and emotional geography, Kashmir is not immune to globalization. It is not clear what effect these changes will have on Kashmiri identity over the medium term, but it could be as dramatic as the rise of mass media in the Valley during the 1980s (Ganguly 1997). These modern changes have the potential to both undermine and underline different versions of Kashmiri identity. They include:

- *The Internet.* In April 2002 there were about 400 Internet cafes across J&K as a whole; the Kashmir Valley probably has over a hundred (*Kashmir Times*, 11 April 2002). Moreover, many middle-class households now have personal connections. As elsewhere, a review of browsing habits shows a mix between instant messaging, job hunting, and the usual array of Bollywood actresses.
- *Mobile telephones.* In August 2003, mobile telephones were finally introduced in the Kashmir Valley. This has led Kashmir to follow the rest of South Asia, and has eased private contact between young urban Kashmiris with contacts across the wider region. By March 2005 many wealthy urban Kashmiris were carrying camera phones.
- *Cable and satellite television.* Television may not be new in Kashmir, but the proliferation of channels (and wide availability of DVDs) has opened up the Valley to a wide range of cultural influences. There have also been recent attempts to provide Kashmir-specific programming (for example, on Doordarshan's Kashir TV, 70 per cent of which is broadcast in Koshur). In May 2005 Zee launched a daily one-hour programme in Koshur.
- *The continuing rise of English-medium education.* English-medium schools (and private tutoring) continue to explode across the Kashmir Valley. To some Kashmiris like the radio presenter A.A. Farhad, this endangers Koshur and Kashmiri culture (Farhad 2001). However, the threat may be overstated given the ease with which Kashmiris can switch from Koshur to Urdu to English.
- *Improved access to the Valley.* By August 2009 a new railway should connect the Kashmir Valley to Jammu. This could



have a significant psychological impact—although only time will tell. Equally the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service, begun in April 2005, has enabled direct contact between the Valley and Muzaffarabad for the first time in fifty years (although it carries relatively few passengers).

For all their differences, the two main Kashmiri identities—one Valley-based that draws strongly on Koshur and geography, the other based on a differently idealized versions of being Kashmiri for those living in Pakistani-administered Kashmir and the diaspora—have something in common. On both sides of the Line of Control, those who care about the benefits of the past have an interest in preserving a living culture that is continually adapting and changing in response to our modern, globalized world. And it is rural culture, above all, that acts as a repository of Kashmiri culture (Wani 2001). It is important for all those who identify as Kashmiris to take responsibility for their future; it is they who will decide their own identities. A Koshur proverb reads *phirith pheran tshunnun*, literally ‘to put on a *pheran* inside out’, which means to blame someone else for one’s own fault (Koul 2005: 135). The appeal of Kashmiri exceptionalism is a tragic one: history happens to Kashmiris, according to this rhetoric, rather than Kashmiris deciding history. Yet the story of Kashmiri exceptionalism illustrates an unchanging Kashmiri (and global) attribute: the ultimate ability to define oneself.

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